

Teachers As Writers Category:

The Mountains

by Lainie Steer
Canberra College



The detritus spreads. Its writhing tentacles weave across the remnants of what was once floor. Flat terrain now undulated with small mountains of rubbish. Carpet buried alive. Couch swallowed. Chairs groaning under insurmountable weight. A cockroach flits out from behind a stacked collection of lidless containers. Antennae quivering, dirt underfoot. It moves toward a tower of browned paper plates but is stopped abruptly. A mouse has found the roach. Death is swift and lawless in these ranges. The mouse scurries on.

She stands in a place once called kitchen, examining endless mugs. Her feet are bare, almost entirely obscured by the bottom of a long nightgown. The small pink flowers that dot the material are faded. The delicate lace trim, yellow. She muses at the ceramic collection before her and selects a squat green mug. A shrill whistle is screaming through the silence, steam ripping through the musty air. Her small feet shuffle towards the stove. Papery skin strains across knuckles as she lifts the kettle from its perch. Boiled water spills from the spout and mixes with the dirt which already had claimed the squat green mug as home, swirling hypnotically. She has two spotted hands on the kettle, thin arms shaking with the effort of raising the cast iron beast. It slams back down on the stove, harder than she meant. Dirt shrieks in terror and flies from its resting spot, visible briefly in the shaft of sunlight that comes through a rip in the muted mustard curtains. It floats back down, fear abated, serene in returning to its position layering the once white stovetop. She's looking for a teabag. She shuffles about. Long toenails periodically scrape the floor. Atop a stack of newspapers with curled edges there is a metal tin that she happens upon with a grunt of satisfaction. Her hands quiver permanently these days and she struggles to catch the thin line of the lid. The dirt that lives beneath her fingernails is pushed further into each crevice. The mouse darts across her foot, flying around the debris to hide under the safety of the fridge. She doesn't notice. She is victorious in her battle with the tin and clutches a teabag triumphantly in her tightly clawed hand. Shaky dunks into the mug leach brown colouring into the liquid, joining the swirling dirt. She pulls out the teabag and carefully places it at the top of a pyramid she has been steadily creating on her kitchen table. Used teabags balance precariously, a sculpture of waste. Her bed is the only place left with surface available to sit upon, so she and her mug shuffle their way towards it.

There is a photograph she keeps in her bedroom. Two people: one young boy smiling steadily at the camera; and the body of a woman, her arm still visible around him but her face burned away. Gone. The young boy, not so young anymore she supposed, is her grandson. There was a time she used to leave her house and go to his. Spend time with him, look after him. Until the last day.

When she arrived back home, she did not immediately notice what had happened. In the dark she made her way to her heavy wooden front door, put her silver key in, turned the latch and pushed. The door swung all the way. That was when she knew. The door could usually only be opened halfway, until it met the resistance of some of her treasures.

At first, it was shock. She moved from room to room. Wide, ranging eyes sweeping each space. Taking in the bare tiles and the unfilled bathtub. The shining, blank surface of her dining table and the empty chairs circling it. The couch, now covered over one arm by a knitted throw and nothing more. Everything was sparkling. Even her dust was gone.

Then, it was rage. She yanked the phone from its socket and punched in the familiar sequence. Her daughter barely had time to say hello before vitriol came spewing from her like the filth that had been removed. Hateful words poured out in multitudes and she knew once they were said, they could never be retrieved and yet she said and said again. Tears spilled out of her eyes in endless waves and her wretched sobs travelled down the phone line to a daughter who couldn't find a spare moment to respond. Who would never be able to justify her actions in her mother's eyes. Who heard the hate and knew forgiveness could not come, so silently sat as fury crashed over her. She screamed and screamed until her lungs gave out. Her hands reached up to claw at her throat as she took frenzied gulps of air. The phone hit the floor with a thud. The empty, blank floor, rolling on perpetually. All that space. She ran for the small walk-in closet off her bedroom and slammed the door behind her. She sank to the floor. Clear floor. More space. Her arms reached up and frantically ripped clothes off their new, orderly hangers. Yanked them down around her again and again and buried herself in clothes. Her breath came quickly and the tears came quicker. All her possessions were gone. Dead and gone. And so was her daughter.

The next day she had her locks changed, but she kept the old keys. That was the start. It took years but she built back her mountains. Once something came in, it never left. And then, eventually, she never left either. The packages that appeared routinely at her doorstep, the simple supplies that kept her sustained, her tea bags, bread, eggs, might be from the woman who was once her daughter. She can't bring herself to ask, so she can't be sure.

She lays on her bed and sips her tea. Dirt sticks to the small hairs that sit above her lip and catches between the deep lines of her wrinkled skin. Her shaky hands reach to put the green mug down on her bedside table. She rests it on a stack of books that leans heavily, threatening to topple over at any second. Her small head lays on the pillow and her white hair spreads out around her. Her breathing is slow. She is facing her bedside table and looks at her mug, perched on high. She is glad she has the tea. That the tea bags kept coming. She slips first to sleep, then to oblivion. Death is swift and lawless in these ranges. The mouse scurries over her arm. The detritus spreads.